

Discipleship: Growing in Faith
1Thessalonians 1:2-10
Sept 2, 2018

I want you to picture the writer of this letter sitting in his workplace in Tarsus, where he was born and his family lived, wrestling with his new-found faith in Jesus Christ. He was a tentmaker, meaning he not only made tents, but all sorts of leather goods. He's had a life changing experience on the road to Damascus, spent time there and then went into Arabia for three years, meditating on his Jewish traditions and scriptures and Jesus place in that story. With Barnabus he made a short visit to Jerusalem where he met two of the Apostles, James, the Lord's brother, and Peter, and then went home to Tarsus. He has been in that region for about ten years, working, preaching, and thinking through his faith. This is where Saul of Tarsus comes from, where his journey of faith and growth in the Lord is shaped. His letter to the Christians in Thessalonica is chronologically at the beginning of the New Testament, around 51 AD. He is trained in the Law, zealous for the traditions of Israel, but now a fierce defender of Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

He writes his first letter from Athens where is alone and worried about the new Christian community in Thessalonica. He has spent a short time there on his second missionary journey, but had been driven out by the Jewish leaders. Timothy and Silas remained for a while as the supporting team. Timothy joins him in Athens but Paul is anxious and sends Timothy back to find out what is happening to them. He returns with encouraging news. Timothy's report on their growth and love is the basis for this letter.

Here is how Paul thinks of the Christians in Thessalonika: ***We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers... remembering ...your work of faith, and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***

These Gentiles had made a decision to follow the way of Jesus. It surely means that they have opted for a path that leads through the cross and resurrection of Christ into a life of faith, hope and love. Perhaps "work of faith" might be translated "work that

belongs to faith". Their lives have been changed by the message of the Gospel. Now their lives are characterized by and expressed in faith, love and hope.

Moreover, these newly formed communities of Jesus followers were moved by the Spirit to choose to follow Jesus: ***For we know...that he has chosen you, because our message of the Gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.***

At the heart of the New Testament is this consistent theme: discipleship. In the New Testament this word means to be being a follower of Jesus Christ. This also means a shift has taken place in their lives. Paul finishes his opening thanksgiving with these words:

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Thessalonica was a major centre of Roman influence. It stood on a main crossroads and was an important port guaranteeing it prosperity. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Trading their gods for the one revealed in Jesus involved a huge cultural, political and social challenge. Trading the traditional gods for Jesus as King and Lord really did mean they were turning the world upside down, as Paul will say later in the letter. When they turned to God from idols it would have been noticed on the streets where these new followers lived. People would gossip, "that family down the street haven't been to a single festival all month." No longer did they offer animal sacrifices at local shrines. Worshipping "the gods", the great pantheon of Greek and Roman gods...permeated every aspect of life in Paul's world.

As N.T.Wright says in his Paul biography: ***In the ancient world whether at home, on the street, in the public square, attending festivals, or at weddings or funerals, the gods would be there to be acknowledged, placated and pleased.***

As they went around the corner to the local market they would have bumped into gods of every description. They now saw these gods and their shrines from a new perspective. Now they viewed them as worthless and false. They approached work, relationships, the Roman circus, and gods like Caesar differently.

Our gods are different of course, but they are just as powerful. To be a disciple of Jesus means at some point we have made a decisive turn from the gods of our society. And it is not just a once for all decision but a choice that continues each day in the way we interpret life. As Christians we interact with contemporary society, with its values and beliefs, from a faith perspective. Today's gods may be more hidden and subtle, yet they are equally powerful.

For us today, like these Christians in Thessalonica, Scripture becomes the lens through which we interpret all our interactions with society: politics, the entertainment industry, sports, ethics, law, and relationships. This requires us to be students of that Scripture and its wisdom. And we do this best, as did all the early church communities, like Thessalonica, together in worship and study and prayer.

Let's be honest; it's not easy to maintain our faith in the face of the secularism, mistrust of religious institutions, and the power of our modern gods. There are so many ways our faith can become sidelined. It's not only the confusion that seems to pervade our society when it comes to faith questions, but also because of the wholesale abandonment of the Judea/Christian tradition in the West.

So what keeps you on the path? How secure is your faith and does it have roots that go down deep into the God story of Scripture? And I'm not talking about religious feelings or duty, or respectable ethics. Does Jesus as Lord truly affect how we think, act and conduct ourselves? How can the church help to nurture and strengthen us in that faith story? We ought to be clear about that path. Is our life map anchored in the sweeping story of the Old & New Testaments? Indeed, what alternative map are you using?

It seems to me that consistent community worship as well as small group studies are the most effective way to nurture faith at whatever level we are at in our faith development.

We have made a choice as Christians to turn toward Christ from idols to serve the living God revealed in Jesus. He is the one through whom God's rescue plan is being fulfilled and we are part of that plan. As such we are people who turn, who serve and who wait.

Amen